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## No city for migrant women: construction workers' experiences of exclusion from urban governance and discrimination in labour markets in Ahmedabad

Nivedita Jayaram, Priyanka Jain and Sangeeth Sujatha Sugathan

### ABSTRACT

Ahmedabad, Gujarat, is one of the fastest growing cities in the world, and a reflection of India's story of exclusionary economic growth. This article focuses on research carried out with women construction workers with the help of a migrant construction workers' union in Ahmedabad. It describes the method used by women members of the union to make visible their experiences as migrants in the city – with men, local authorities, and employers – to highlight the additional burdens that they bear due to a negligent state and industry, advocate for better working and living conditions, and raise consciousness of gender inequalities that need to be integrated into the demands of the workers' union.

Ahmedabad, dans le Gujarat, est l'une des villes du monde qui connaissent la croissance la plus rapide, et elle reflète l'histoire de la croissance économique excluante de l'Inde. Cet article se concentre sur des recherches menées auprès d'ouvrières du bâtiment avec l'aide d'un syndicat d'ouvriers du bâtiment à Ahmedabad. Il décrit la méthode utilisée par les femmes membres du syndicat pour rendre visibles leurs expériences en tant que migrantes dans la ville – avec les hommes, ainsi qu'avec les autorités et employeurs locaux – afin de mettre en relief les fardeaux supplémentaires qu'elles doivent porter du fait d'un État et d'une industrie qui les négligent, de préconiser des conditions de vie et de travail meilleures, et de mener un travail de sensibilisation aux inégalités entre les sexes qui doivent être soulevées dans le cadre des exigences du syndicat de travailleurs.

Ahmedabad, Gujarat, es una de las ciudades de más rápido crecimiento en el mundo y constituye un reflejo de la historia de crecimiento económico excluyente de India. A partir del apoyo ofrecido por un sindicato de trabajadores de la construcción integrado por inmigrantes que llegaron a esta ciudad, el presente artículo se centra en una investigación realizada con trabajadoras de la construcción. Al respecto, da cuenta del método que las mujeres miembros del sindicato utilizan para hacer visibles sus experiencias como migrantes en la ciudad —con hombres, autoridades locales y empleadores— y resaltar las cargas adicionales que soportan como consecuencia de un Estado y una industria negligentes, abogar por mejores condiciones de trabajo y de vida, y crear conciencia sobre las desigualdades de género, a fin de que sean integradas en las demandas del sindicato de trabajadores.

### KEYWORDS

Adivasi; women; migrant labour; Ahmedabad; gender inequality; urban governance; construction; feminist research

## Introduction

Ahmedabad, Gujarat, is a prime example of the rapid urban-led economic growth that India has experienced in the last few decades. With an expanding industrial periphery and booming infrastructural development, it has been recognised as one of the fastest growing cities in the world. However, this growth has been an exclusionary one, and has not led to improved standards of living or better conditions of work for the most marginalised sections of the population (Jain and Sharma 2018). In 2013, Ahmedabad had around 225,000 construction sites (Aajeevika Bureau 2013), demanding docile and cheap labour.

Around 80 per cent of the city's construction workforce (Prayas 2009, 1) – 100,000 workers (*ibid.*, 9) – are Bhil Adivasi<sup>1</sup> migrants. While these workers form the backbone of Ahmedabad's attempts to create world-class infrastructure, they face multiple forms of exclusion and discrimination in the city and its construction sector. They are absorbed as casual and unskilled labour, and are excluded from skilled work as masons or carpenters (Mosse *et al.* 1997). They receive very low wages, at an average of Rs. 5,000 per month, and face frequent cases of the non-payment or under-payment of wages by their contractors and employers (Jayaram 2018).

Forty-two per cent of Bhil Adivasi migrants from the region are women migrating with their families for work (Mosse *et al.* 2005, 3026), and women comprise 30 per cent of the construction workforce in Ahmedabad (Prayas 2009, 9). Yet the scale of Adivasi women migrating for paid work across India is often overlooked by researchers and policymakers (Shekar 2018). One reason for this is that women migrants are widely assumed to be simply wives accompanying male migrant workers. But in fact, a comparative lack of restrictions on women's mobility outside the home means Adivasi women's participation in waged migrant labour is higher compared to other social groups (Mazumdar 2014). Adivasi women actually comprise over 21 per cent of migrant women workers in urban areas – more than ten times the percentage of Adivasi women in the overall female population of India, largely performing casual work in the construction sector (*ibid.*, 18).

A second reason for a lack of attention to Adivasi migrant women as a group is that they typically continue to remain highly mobile, frequently moving between their rural source and different urban work destinations, while development research and practice remains focused on semi-settled or permanent migrants (Centre for Women's Development Studies 2012). Women migrants experience different forms of exclusion owing to their Bhil Adivasi identity, compounded by their gender-based experiences and patriarchal power relations in the city and the construction sector.

## Bhil Adivasis and development in India

The Bhil Adivasi community comes from the rural borderlands of southern Rajasthan, eastern Gujarat, and western Madhya Pradesh. Faced with displacement from their traditional land- and forest-based livelihoods, a significant 65 per cent of households from this community have been migrating to Gujarat's large cities, including Ahmedabad, to

perform casual and unskilled construction work, which forms 86 per cent of their household income (Mosse *et al.* 2005, 3026).

Economic growth in India has been concentrated in urban areas, while rural communities face declining agricultural productivity and deterioration of natural resources, fueling large-scale rural–urban migration (Bremas 1996). However, migration to urban areas has not meant improved work and living conditions for these communities. National statistics from just over a decade ago reveal that over 92 per cent of the workforce is in informal employment (National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector 2007, 1). This means that urban economic growth has created non-standard, risky, and precarious forms of work, and has been achieved at the cost of labour rights – diluting labour regulations, weakening the trade union movement, and with low access to social security (Mitchell *et al.* 2014).

The relationship between informal work, and poverty has been well established, as a significant proportion of migrants absorbed in informal jobs are also from the most socio-economically marginalised groups such as Adivasis, Dalits, and religious minorities who migrate to perform unskilled and casual labour, and are pushed into greater levels of deprivation in the cities (Shah and Lerche 2018). In addition to poor conditions of work, urban areas have not afforded these communities basic dignified living conditions in the city, as urban restructuring, infrastructural development, and city beautification has led to displacements, evictions, and hostility towards poor migrant communities (Bhagat 2017).

The exclusion and discrimination faced by Bhil Adivasis is further aggravated by a lack of dignified living conditions in the city, and the hostility they face from the political administration and sociocultural aspects of the cities where they migrate (Sugathan and Jayaram 2018). Migrants also lack the means to improve their work and living conditions through ‘social capital’ (Aajeevika Bureau 2014). By this, we mean they lack access to the support of patrons, neighbours, and friends that more established city-dwellers may be able to call on, and also lack access to traditional trade unions or other mechanisms for collective bargaining, as we discuss later. As stated above, Adivasi women are largely absent from accounts of migration for work. In this article, we aim to go some way to fill this knowledge gap. We draw on research undertaken by Aajeevika Bureau,<sup>2</sup> a labour organisation that has been working with migrant worker populations in western India, including Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra, since 2005. The research offers important insights for policymakers in urban governance and labour administration, as well as international and national development.

## Our research

The research we discuss here was consciously intended to gather information that could be used to advocate Adivasi women construction workers’ rights. The research process lasted from September 2017 to April 2018. We were directly involved in the research as members of Aajeevika’s research team, supported by staff from the organisation’s Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) in Ahmedabad, who work closely with Adivasi migrants in the city. Our research participants were identified with the help of women members of the Bandhkaam

Mazdoor Vikas Sangathan (BMVS), a migrant construction workers' union in Ahmedabad city.<sup>3</sup> Aajeevika supported the setting up and facilitation of the BMVS, and the research was conducted as part of this long-term collaboration.

### *Participants*

Our research process involved over 100 Adivasi migrant women construction workers. The age range of women was 16–60, with the majority being between 20 and 35 years. Most of them were married and living with their families in the city, while a few unmarried women lived with their parents or brothers' families.

The women in our research fell into two categories in relation to their living arrangements. The first category is women who lived in open spaces across the city and its peripheries, with their households and communities, accessing work through labour *nakas* (points in the city where large numbers of labourers congregate to seek daily wage work through labour contractors every morning, largely in the construction sector). Based on an informal mapping of the city, we found that there are 2,500 Bhil Adivasi migrant families living in open spaces, which had at least one female member.

The second category of women in our research is women who actually lived within the construction site, where they work in makeshift or auto-constructed rooms, with their families, on a temporary oral contract with a labour contractor to work on the site for any number of months.

### *Approaches*

Feminist perspectives on poverty highlight that from a woman's perspective, it is not only about individual and household deprivation. It is also about what household members, in particular women, are compelled to do to survive and help their households cope without decent work, basic services, and infrastructure. Women increase their work, via longer hours or multi-tasking (Floro 1995). This means women internalise the costs of poverty, with detrimental consequences to their health and well-being (Ribeiro and Marinho 2012).

The research aimed to make the experiences of women visible, via a central focus on the additional burden of work borne by women. We drew on feminist understandings of work as *all* activities performed by women for sustaining their household, including unpaid and invisible work as well as their participation in the paid labour force through employment at the construction sites. We focused on three aspects of women's lives: (1) lack of access to public provisioning and basic services perpetrated by a negligent state; (2) the gender-based division of work and the lack of basic facilities at worksites under extractive employers; and (3) the age-old functions of providing love, care, food, and cleanliness for migrant households in deplorable work and living conditions.

In our research, we found the concept of women's 'gendered burdens' a very powerful one that enabled better understanding of the gender-based challenges and exclusion they face. We discuss this concept more fully below.

## Methods

In the research, women's work burdens were explored by tracing the chronology of our participants' work day, following their experiences across their living spaces and worksites, and noting their interactions with their households and neighbouring communities, employers, the city, and its administration. We adapted and modified a traditional time-use survey method based on a 24-hour recall, to measure the length and intensity of women's work. In addition to this, we also measured the weights women carried, and the distances they walked throughout the day. In addition to the time-use survey, we also held 60 semi-structured in-depth interviews, four focus group discussions, five non-participant observations, and two gender training sessions. In total, the research involved more than 100 women construction workers.

We aspired to engage meaningfully with the women workers who supported our investigation and were a subject of our study. Overall, our strategy was a simple one: to carry out research with women and share the findings with the collective, and then to facilitate a dialogue among the members of BMVS that could potentially lead to activism. We hoped the research would help trigger a process through which the women members of the collective come to make the collective 'their own' in substantive ways. BMVS is an occupation-based platform and it has until recently mirrored most of the union and collectives in India, in being a male-dominated space. To this end, we wanted to facilitate critical reflection, discourse-building, and action among members of the BMVS, led by its women members. After the findings had been analysed by the authors, along with colleagues from Aajeevika's Ahmedabad centre, we took them back to migrant women and the BMVS to corroborate and analyse the evidence along with the participants. We then planned a meeting to discuss the research, on 15 April 2018.

In the next sections we share key findings, starting with a revealing story of an individual woman, Lakku *ben* (a term which literally translates to sister, a customary way of addressing women in Gujarati society).

### Lakku *ben's* story

Lakku *ben* was asked if she gets time to rest during the day. She reprimanded the investigators with these words. She migrated with her family five years ago from their village in the severely impoverished, tribal-dominated district of Dahod, Gujarat, to seek work in Ahmedabad city's numerous construction sites. Her family has been living on abandoned open ground on the periphery of the city, which has been occupied by Adivasi migrant families from their region for over two decades.

Who has given us time to rest? We start working as soon as we open our eyes! We work at home, and then at the site. We come back from the site, and continue working at home. We might be tired but there is always water to fetch or fuel to collect. But we are used to it now. I work so much more than anyone else in my family. I even work more than the skilled worker on the site! My husband will never be able to perform the work I do. As my day's wages, I think I receive Rs. 300, which is handed over to my husband. (Semi-structured interview, Ahmedabad, 13 October 2017)

Lakku *ben's* account of her day in the city is a tale of relentless labour, in multiple roles: as a wife and mother in a migrant household; as a female Adivasi migrant in a hostile city; and as a casual construction worker. Her work is shaped by patriarchal power relations in each of these roles, and she is forced to work ever-longer and harder, to earn wages to sustain her family's livelihood and maintain the household. She can also be seen as subsidising the city's economic growth through her low-paid and unpaid work.

### **Bhil Adivasi migrant women's work burdens**

Lakku *ben's* story resembles many similar daily experiences of scores of Adivasi migrant women employed in the city's construction sector. From our time-use survey we estimated that Adivasi migrant women in Ahmedabad's construction sites spend an average of 17 hours a day performing both paid and unpaid work across construction sites, their living spaces, and in accessing basic facilities in the city.

Over the course of the day, the women in our research walked a median of 10 km (of which four are actually walked in the course of construction work). Women lifted and carried around 5,680 kg,<sup>4</sup> and climbed around 480 steps. They worked on shaky platforms and uneven terrain, in hazardous conditions. They were permitted to take few breaks, because the construction materials have to be constantly supplied for speedy work.

Throughout the day, women rested for only an average of 40 minutes. At the worksite, they spent an average of eight hours in paid construction work, and an additional 30 minutes performing unpaid gender-based work relating to the paid construction work, such as cleaning the site, and washing tools or utensils. They spent five hours on household reproduction and care work, including cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, and child care before and after their work on site. They spent 3.5 hours accessing basic facilities such as sanitation, water, and fuel, walking to and from the *naka* or worksite, and wrapping and unwrapping their household items every morning, which need to be kept safe while they are working.

### **Women's experiences working in construction**

In Ahmedabad's construction sector, as in the rest of the country, migrant Adivasi women are relegated to the lowest ends of the labour value chain. They are largely hired as labourers in the Reinforced Cement Concrete (RCC) trade, where they lift and carry concrete, cement, sand, and water from one place to the other.

Gender norms devalue women's labour from the recruitment process onwards. Under the '*jodi*-based'<sup>5</sup> recruitment system, women workers are not even visible as individuals. Husbands and wives are hired as a couple, and the man receives the wages for both. Women often do not even know how much 'their' wages are. Gender norms also affect the value given to women's work in construction. We found that employers saw the work of lifting and carrying materials at construction sites in Ahmedabad as suited to women. This work was not considered on a par with forms of work performed by men, and is paid less, justified by the fact that women perform similar arduous unpaid work which is seen as natural and unskilled.

Unskilled construction work is gruelling for both women and men, but women's work is acutely and particularly so. Men's unskilled work is usually in the role of 'helper'. Helpers either collect together the individual loads of construction materials for the woman to carry, or help the (male) skilled workers. Women generally perform the strenuous labour of lifting and carrying. A site engineer argued:

Women are used to lifting and carrying things, they have been doing that for many years, carrying firewood and water for their households. Their necks are much more stable. Men cannot do this task.

In spite of the length and intensity of women's labour on the sites, this study finds that they face a gender wage gap of Rs. 50, receiving only Rs. 300 in daily wages, whereas male unskilled workers receive Rs. 350.

### ***Water and sanitation: the intensification of unpaid work***

Struggles to obtain basic services were a key theme for women in our research. Women's unpaid work is intensified by the lack of basic services, including water, for the poorest families in the city. As we stated earlier, construction workers either live in highly informal and degraded conditions, in open spaces across the city, or inside the construction sites where they work, without access to basic facilities and services (Sugathan and Jayaram 2018). This amounts to a gender bias on the part of city policymakers. In the time-use surveys, we saw the impact of the daily struggle to obtain these basic resources.

On average, women living in open spaces across the city woke up by 4:00 am, and some as early as 3:30 am. In contrast, men from the same communities awoke at around 6:30 am. This difference in waking time is explained by the fact that women have to find secluded spaces for defecation and bathing before men awake and before daylight. Women who live in the open, but at the centre of the city, were unable to resort to open defecation, relying on pay-and-use toilets instead. These toilets cost Rs. 15 every day, for a single use by the woman, including Rs. 5 for defecation and Rs. 10 for bathing and washing clothes – while daily wages are as low as Rs. 650 on average for a family with two working adults. Yet they informed us that such toilets are not always available in their locality, and even if they are, they are often closed or dysfunctional due to poor maintenance.

Our study found women on average walking an additional 3 km, spending one hour daily accessing toilets. They faced the immense stress that they might not be able to find a toilet, or might be delayed in getting back to their families. An additional very significant source of stress was that women and girls may not find the time and opportunity to access a toilet for the next 12 hours. Shanta *ben*, 45 years old, has been living on a pavement in Ahmedabad for over two decades, where she migrated with her family from Dahod, Gujarat. She wakes up at 3:30 am every day to relieve herself and bathe before daybreak:

I'm always stressed. If I don't finish all my household work quickly, I will not reach the labour *naka* on time. If I skip my tasks and go to the *naka*, my family will suffer.



In contrast, women living on construction sites can wake later, at 5:00 am, as they have more chance of finding a secluded space on the site for open defecation, and some sites have toilets and bathrooms within the site. However, they reported that toilets and bathrooms on the site are often half-built, or without doors and proper cover, which meant that they cannot access them later than 5:30 am, when they would be occupied by male co-workers. This forced them to refrain from eating or drinking adequate amounts of water so that they can resist the urge to use the toilet. Menstruation worsens these issues. Women said they end up having to take short breaks from work, seeking out spots to relieve themselves, risking being shouted at or having their wages cut if the pace of work is affected.

Fetching water for household needs was also an ordeal for women living in open spaces. They report that takes at least 30 minutes every day to access water, and walking an average 1.5 km, carrying a 20 litre canister back and forth, for an average of five times. Leela *ben*, who lives on an abandoned lot in the city, said:

Before the sun rises and the residents from the apartment across the street wake up, we sneak into the apartment building and fetch water from the common tap. We have to be quiet as the guard might see us and shoo us away. If we are caught, we will have to go looking for another water tap.

In contrast, women living on construction sites have access to water taps that are used in the construction work, which reduces their work burden, although these may not work.

A lack of access to good quality fuel results in additional hours spent cooking on inadequate and damp firewood that they collect from across the city. Women also reported using discarded items on the construction site, including wood pieces, shavings or cardboard as fuel, the cost of which the contractor cuts from their wages. They sometimes also purchase firewood from the market, but report that they cannot afford it every day.

### ***Risk and constant vigilance: a failure of governance***

Migrant women who have been living in open spaces, with their communities occupying the same space for decades, reported to us that they have never been able to stake a claim in the city. On the one hand, they remained invisible as they are not enumerated or documented. At the same time, they are vulnerable to evictions.

Suman *ben* shared the struggle that she and other women living in an empty lot in the city have had with the residents in their neighbouring apartments:

We built a structure from discarded materials collected from the construction site so that we could store some of our assets, and also for women to use as a safe space which can be locked from the inside. The residents of the apartment next door forced us to take it down because they do not want us to create a permanent structure!

Women living in open spaces live their lives under constant scrutiny, with the constant fear of being evicted and displaced, and their meagre assets being taken away. They experience this fear as violence. Because of this risk, women said they bring minimal assets and labour-saving implements when they migrate, and this further lengthens their work. With only one utensil for cooking, women cannot cook two items simultaneously in order to

save time, and with just two pairs of clothes for each family member, they are forced to wash their clothes every day.

Informal migrant settlements in open spaces around the city do not come under the purview of the local authorities. The Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation's (AMC) urban governance and housing schemes<sup>6</sup> are largely dictated by the electoral agenda of the state government, with bureaucratic control over city administration, leaving little space for local planning and conceptualisation (Mahadevia 2014). As mobile populations have no voting rights in the city, the state has little incentive to respond to their needs. There has been no official enumeration of seasonal migrant communities living in different parts of the city, and hence their presence in the city goes undocumented. So too do their claims over the spaces which they occupy. The schemes mentioned above have won city awards for good urban governance, yet they fail to take into account the unique conditions and needs of the large communities of seasonal migrant workers. Without basic domicile documents, and facing high levels of mobility and informality, seasonal migrant workers are unable to meet the requirements of these urban governance schemes (Sugathan and Jayaram 2018).

Furthermore, India's Building and Other Construction Workers' (BoCW) Act of 1996,<sup>7</sup> requires the employers or contractors of construction workers to ensure the safety and well-being of all workers, including migrants, in the city. In Ahmedabad, the Gujarat Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board (BoCWWB) is responsible for implementing this act. However, it remains largely unimplemented, with migrant families receiving no support from their employers for accessing dignified housing in the city.

### ***Constant work: living on construction sites***

The Gujarat BoCWWB requires that employers provide adequate housing for construction workers in the city. However, it does not take into account the realities of the large number of migrant communities living informally within construction sites, and their conditions of living. At the same time, the AMC, which is responsible for providing basic services in the city, does not account for workers living on construction sites as these are not residential areas. These workers, too, remain invisible to regulatory and municipal authorities.

While women living on the construction site do sometimes appear to have better conditions, for example makeshift rooms, access to relatively private spots for defecation, and water, they pay a high price: they are dependent on labour contractors and employers. They are always on site and this means they can be asked to work at any time. Our research found that in return for the sub-optimal facilities that they receive at the construction sites, women living on construction sites work well beyond the minimum working hours, on average working 9.5 hours every day, sometimes before 9 am, and often well past midnight.

Seeta *ben* reported that she had not left the construction site where she was working for five months. She said:

I have to quickly finish all my household tasks as the labour contractor can come in at any moment and demand that I start working. There are no demarcated work times on the construction site. (Semi-structured interview, Ahmedabad, 13 December 2017)

One labour contractor who participated in our research stated:

We do not like hiring workers on the *naka*, they come and go as they please, we prefer workers who live on the site and are available for work at all times. We provide them all the facilities they need. The women have rooms with doors and toilets on the site. (Informal interaction, Ahmedabad, 22 January 2018)

When the formal work of construction has stopped, women are required to do the equivalent of 'housework', maintaining the half-completed buildings and equipment on the site. We were told by women that they are responsible for ensuring that the site is well-maintained and clean, that tools are in their appropriate places and stored safely after work, that the materials are not getting ruined, and that the pace of the construction is progressing steadily. They perform this work early before men begin working, and stay back longer after men have completed their work day. However, they are not paid separately for this work. As these are tasks relegated to women within the household, employers present it as natural that women perform this unpaid work at the site as well.

### **Health, safety, and child care: lack of basic services**

The BoCW Act also requires the employers of construction workers to provide them with basic facilities including appropriate housing, plus water, sanitation, and child care facilities at the construction sites. However, we found that these provisions were not implemented in most of the sites that we visited. More than 80 per cent of over 300 sites that Aajeevika Bureau has visited lack a creche despite the large number of women workers.

Faced with long hours and the constant risk they will be pulled in for more work, on sites without child care, or living in open spaces without any support system to leave their children behind when they go to work, women are forced to undertake various actions. Because child care is not considered relevant to employers who focus only on paid work, women migrant workers find themselves doing care work together with their paid employment in the most dangerous and stressful conditions. They may have to resort to tying swings within the hazardous sites, in which they place their infant children, while their toddlers roam around the site unmonitored.

Geeta *ben* shared:

I'm constantly worried about my children, I switch my attention between the work I'm performing and my children every minute, making it very difficult to perform either work. I don't attend to my baby unless she starts to cry. Even then I risk being screamed at by the contractor.

Some women bring a younger female relative with them to care for their children. On the day of our observation, 22 January 2018, Anita *ben* gobbled down her breakfast while breastfeeding her infant, before getting ready for work. As she changed her clothes, the labour contractor barged into her room. She rushed outside, to first make a swing from

a piece of cloth to place her child. She then lifted and carried five sacks of cement weighing 50 kg each. She was then given the task of lifting and carrying concrete stones to and from the grinding machine. She walked back and forth 50 m, carrying 36 kg on her head at a time – 157 times throughout the day. Every time she took a break, to feed her child or use the toilet, she called to her ten-year-old sister-in-law to replace her.

If my sister-in-law was not brought from the village for this, I would not have been able to use the toilet or feed my child. In this way, I am much more fortunate than other women on the site. (Non-participant observation, Ahmedabad, 22 January 2018)

Even then, Anita *ben* was only able to breastfeed her child twice in nine hours, the day we observed her – each time, for just five minutes. At lunch break, she spent most of her time washing utensils, serving her family, and caring for her child, before taking 15 minutes rest. After the work for the day was over, she spent an additional half an hour cleaning the site along with other women workers (*ibid.*).

While child care is non-existent, self-care is also almost impossible. Lack of access to basic health services, and lack of labour rights that respect the human needs for health care during illness and natural processes including pregnancy, are facts of life for migrant women workers here. Paid work has to carry on regardless of the impact this has. Kanta *ben*, who lives in a temporary settlement near a railway track in the city, said:

We cannot afford to stay back from work when they are ill. Our living spaces are highly unsafe during the day when the entire community is at work. We are forced to go to the construction site and perform strenuous labour regardless of our illness.

Women either visit private clinics when they are sick – which charge them anywhere between Rs. 350 and Rs. 1,000 for a single visit – or return to their villages when they are very ill. If this happens, their husbands are forced to take time off work, forfeiting the day's wages, to accompany them, as they are unable to navigate the city by themselves because of the danger of harassment, as well as inability to understand the complicated procedures in public hospitals, clinics, or local transportation in the city, which appear particularly inaccessible to them as women.

Women also reported they do not have access to basic ante-natal maternal health care, despite the fact that this is provided through Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers<sup>8</sup> or the local authorities as neither the open spaces where they live nor the construction sites come under the ambit of the city administration. This care is critical for women, since they reported they typically remain in the city until the last month of their pregnancy, performing the same strenuous work, and they return to work fewer than 15 days following the delivery of their child. Therefore, unattended deliveries at the workplace, miscarriages, reproductive health issues, and poor pre- and post-natal care are common occurrences on construction sites.

This evidence suggests that women's work is intensified and aggravated as families living both in open spaces as well as within construction sites come neither under the purview of the local authorities' urban governance schemes nor the labour administration's regulatory oversight. In the next section, we speak about how the negligence of the state

and the extractive practices of the industry, which remains unregulated, come together to create a disproportionate burden of work on women.

### **'Gendered burdens' subsidising a city's growth**

We find the term 'gendered burdens' helpful as we explore the realities faced by women migrant construction workers in Ahmedabad. When the state's public provisioning is exclusionary, or its machinery treats the poor with violence, or when the employer oversteps its legal responsibilities towards its labour force, women compensate for what is missing by increasing the extent, duration, and intensity of their work.

It is critical to understand that the gendered burden is not just extra physical work. It has marked emotional and cognitive features to it – with the women having to run around, plan, worry, care, stress more and more, while subsuming the indignity of violence and harassment at the same time. The compounded effects of these fall on the body and minds of women, which deteriorates as the city around them grows. The costs of this growth – and the prosperity of elites enjoying the 'modern city' – have been shifted by a negligent state and extractive employers on to migrant households, and women within them.

The gendered burden is concealed by gender norms. Women's additional need to spend extended periods of time collecting fuel, water, and other basic goods and services becomes neatly subsumed within the existing gender-based division of work found within the household. Given that women traditionally perform these roles anyway, extra work created by the negligence of the state and employer easily slips into the woman's basket of work without evoking much concern. It is essential to make the gendered burden visible, as a first step towards calling out this relationship of the state and industry to women. What is happening in these city spaces, and the actors responsible, are not separate or isolated from the continuing patriarchal relations that remain embedded in Indian society. In fact, contrary to its claims of progress, both the state and industry are found to use women's bodies and minds to offset their negligence. Despite their veneer of modernity, they are using age-old patriarchal processes, keeping women entrenched in domestic work.

It follows that challenges and potential solutions need to first and foremost tackle entrenched attitudes towards women's work. The antidote to the problem needs to start from making stakeholders conscious of their roles in aggravating and devaluing women's work, as the first step towards reducing their work burden. In the next section, we discuss BMVS' use of evidence from this study to embark on such a process.

### **BMVS's journey: towards feminist action, emerging from a feminist knowledge**

On 15 April 2018, a meeting was held in which the study's research team presented the findings of the study to the members of BMVS. The meeting was attended by 80 active members, including 25 women. Before and after this event, the research team held similar but smaller, neighbourhood-level meetings throughout a 20-day campaign so that it was

easier for women to participate. Around seven gender workshops were also held with women during this period, in addition to the regular monthly meetings of the union. Across all of these, the research team was able to facilitate a dialogue among 500 workers.

Some key shifts took place through these discussions. First, women powerfully articulated their thoughts and feelings about their gendered work burdens. The experience brought them together in solidarity with each other, recognising their common condition standing at the intersection of Adivasi, labourer, woman, and migrant identities. Secondly, a space opened up for debate and contestation on the commonly held notions and perceptions of women's work within the union, allowing for tension points to be tackled and discursive shifts to occur. Thirdly, the discussions started the union's journey towards greater gender consciousness and integration of women's issues in its core agenda and action.

Before this process started, BMVS mirrored much of the shortcomings of the wider labour movement in the country<sup>9</sup> in relation to gender and women's rights issues. As a mixed, trade-based group with both men and women, its discourse, priorities, and leadership suggested strong male dominance (as reported by Aajeevika's MRC in Ahmedabad, which facilitated the setting up and strengthening of the union). Until April 2018, only 12.5 per cent of BMVS' 1,600 members were women, and only one of 15 leaders were women (as reported to us during the study by the leadership of the union). Moreover, only 25 of the 200 women members were active, as most signed up simply because their husbands joined. Besides focusing on linking women workers to maternity benefits, the union's demands, outreach methods, and advocacy priorities were largely based around a male-centric imagination and prioritisation of issues.

During the event on 15 April, the day's proceedings started with the study's research team sharing an account of a typical 24 hours of an Adivasi, migrant woman working in Ahmedabad's construction sector. The findings were presented in a chronological fashion, starting from the beginning of the day in the early hours until bedtime, while mapping the intensity, extent, and simultaneity of the work they perform, with weights, distances, and time estimates used to express the relentless and burdensome nature of the day for these women. It was easy to observe the rapt attention with which the women listened, nodding in affirmation and murmuring agreement as the discussion progressed. It seemed that presenting their day in this manner enabled women to intuitively connect and grasp theoretical concepts of women's work such as time poverty, productive–unproductive work categories, or devaluation of work.

When the research team enquired whether the findings were valid and reflected their experience faithfully, Shansheela *ben*, a 17-year-old girl, stood up and argued that the findings were true for her life. In fact, she stressed that her previous day was spent as described. There was palpable excitement among the women in the room. They expressed amazement: while they knew that they carry 50 kg sacks and walk a lot, they had never counted that in a day this labour amounted to around 5,000 kg and 10 km! Thinking about each piece of work individually and not in relation to each other makes them look like commonplace, easy tasks that everyone takes for granted, like lifting, cooking, and cleaning. But seeing the work cumulatively helped to unveil its exhausting and burdensome nature. Lakku *ben* shared:

As soon as I am back I get consumed by household chores, while my husband takes rest. Now when I think about it I realise that I end up doing more work than my husband and he can never match up to my level of work burden. He wouldn't even drink water on his own. He needs my support in serving him water. While performing this act, I feel that my husband is very tired and I shall serve him regardless of my exhaustion.

Sharmina *ben* added:

We do very difficult work at the site, but our work is called unskilled, and we are never permitted to do what they call skilled work.

For over an hour, women continued to reflect critically on their position in their families and at their worksite, provoking questions around fairness and equality, such that the conversation started to show signs of transformative energy and potential.

Not unexpectedly, the men in the collective felt upset and their comments suggested that they felt personally attacked. Interestingly, after the findings were shared, men did not argue against the intensity of labour involved in domestic chores. Some of the male members stressed that such a division of labour at home is natural, unavoidable, and an immutable fact of life. Others claimed that the findings were unfair because they do help their wives at home with domestic chores. It was interesting to note the differing ways in which women contested these arguments.

Keshulal *bhai* and Mukesh *bhai* argued that they would never allow their women to carry 50 kg sacks, and they ensure that women only have to perform easier tasks at the worksite. They claimed that the sacks are half emptied, so that their women only have to carry 25 kg at a time, and only men carry full 50 kg sacks. Women disagreed. Shan-sheela *ben* sharply retorted:

How can these men say that! May be they say this because they have never lifted a cement sack in their lives. Every day, we the women workers start our work at the site by lifting 50 kg sacks.

Other women agreed and said that the weight is marked on the sacks and they are fully packed, contrary to what the men were claiming. After this, some men tried a less-adversarial approach. Ramu *bhai* argued:

We do not make our wives do all the work, men help with fetching water, making tea, and cleaning. In my house, I help my wife do all the work.

To this, Sharma *ben* argued:

Listen, let me tell you what happens in my house. My husband doesn't help me with any household work. I do everything on my own, right from collecting water, cooking food, washing everyone's clothes, etc. He says clearly that he can't do that work. For instance, even if my husband gets water for a single day out of interest, it remains my permanent responsibility to find a regular source of water and carry it to my house.

On the question of keeping women in unskilled jobs, some contractors explained that it is not possible for women to do skilled jobs as it requires the sort of stamina and aptitude that women do not have. This really stirred up the women, especially some of the more experienced women who have been working in the sector for over 15 years. Sharmina

*ben* stressed that for years she has been watching skilled workers perform masonry and knows how to do it herself. She even taught her own sons to perform masonry. Today they work as masons, while she remains trapped with the low wages of an unskilled worker! There was a stunned silence in the room. Signs of grudging acceptance followed among the men.

Eventually one contractor pledged to provide on-the-job training to women for masonry with full wages for the training period. Four other contractors joined him and said they would welcome any woman worker wanting to learn skilled jobs, while some other male members stated that they will pay more attention to domestic chores. This really shifted the mood in the room, as the intensity of the debate gave way to a sort of celebratory, high spirits that comes from overcoming differences and converging around a more just and equitable common position.

The shift that occurred through this dialogue was unambiguously clear. The women drew on the research findings, telling their stories. The day's proceedings suggested that the research had played a critical role in challenging the social norms around the devaluation and invisibility of women's work. This seemed to trigger the start of an emancipatory process within BMVS.

The meeting on 15 April proved to be a critical point in the union's journey. In the months that followed the meeting, BMVS' agenda has absorbed the voice and concerns of women workers, whose experience, knowledge, and intelligence is increasingly shaping the activities and campaigns of the collective. Sue Ledwith (2006) argues that such feminist learning forms the basis of feminist action. BMVS' experiences reflect that such transformations not only make such platforms more gender inclusive, but also more effective in advocating for the gamut of issues that shape the life conditions of women migrant workers in the city.

Following the meeting, the union drew up a demand charter.<sup>10</sup> The charter recognises the gendered burdens of women workers that arise from the abandonment of the migrant household by both state and industry. It demands basic facilities of water, sanitation, affordable fuel, health, and safe spaces from the state, as well as equal pay, workplace safety, and opportunities at work from the employer, based on a recognition that these have the potential to reduce dramatically the labour burden and devaluation of work that women face. On May Day (1 May) 2018, BMVS held a press conference with the city's major media houses, using the occasion of International Labour Day to raise public awareness through its evidence (Ahmedabad Mirror 2018).

BMVS has also been continuously campaigning with AMC and BoCW on their demands, with some early successes coming their way. Between June to August 2018, the union undertook a survey to map out the levels of access to basic services to share with AMC, following which mobile toilets were set up in some of the living areas of seasonal migrant communities. We met with some of the women in these areas after the survey (on 7 August) and they reported that reliable access to sanitation has increased their rest time, reduced expenditure that can be diverted to better food intake, and very importantly reduced their cognitive labour that was needed earlier to cope with the uncertainty around the basic needs of life.



AMC's health department's planning and mapping of the city's poor pockets now includes some of these groups as well (as reported by AMC's Deputy Health Officer to the MRC, which also supported some of these activities). Regular health camps have been organised in these areas since May Day 2018, helping the department gain knowledge and experience of working with seasonal migrants, fostering links between these communities and Urban Health Centres.

In response to demands of union members, AMC started supplying drinking water to 200 families from these communities in three different parts of the city (in December and January 2018). At first, AMC officials declined the demands, arguing that the communities live in these areas illegally. But the union members stressed that they are citizens, and for as long as they live in these spaces, it is their right to have basic living facilities. The women told the officials about their work burden and the harassment they face due to unpredictability and insecurity over something as basic as water. At a meeting with us in January 2018, union members told us that despite its bureaucratic constraints, the AMC gave in to the demands and over 1,000 persons from migrant households have been receiving drinking water near their living spaces.

At the time of writing, three women had started learning masonry – a very low figure, but a sign of progress (as reported by the MRC, which is supporting their training). Another two have come forth to join the leadership of the BMVS union. These developments highlight that BMVS' imagination, discourse, and advocacy has now broadened to a wider spectrum of issues that are able to engage more fully with the ways in which women migrant workers face exclusions as core agenda of the union.

BMVS' journey is in its preliminary stages. Nevertheless, it has wide significance for a few reasons. First of all, it is a union of seasonal migrants, who are severely under-represented in workers platforms' across the country. Even the ones that are focused on informal workers tend to be dominated by settled or semi-settled migrants (Aajeevika Bureau 2014). For example, the Self-Employed Women's Association or SEWA is well-known for its path-breaking work in organising women workers and mainstreaming their concerns (Gillian and Lambert 2013). However, Aajeevika Bureau's MRC reported to us during the study that workers that are Adivasi and seasonal, such as the women in this study, are left out of these spaces as well. Moreover, many collectives and unions have the facility of being women-only spaces. Such women's autonomous spaces are naturally conducive to engendering a gender identity, strengthening women's voice, skills, knowledge, and leadership (Ledwith 2006). BMVS, however, does not have this advantage. For BMVS, empowerment of its women members is likely to be a slower and a more painstaking process, as it would need to engage its male members to develop solidarity around a mutual, liberatory imaginary of justice and rights. Therefore, the start made by the group is all the more important and promising.

In the coming years, the challenge and excitement facing BMVS would be to successfully push the boundaries of its praxis by making bolder demands from the state and industry, taking up sticky issues such as workplace harassment, eviction from living

spaces, and equal pay for women. Very importantly, the women workers would also have to keep alive the discussion on their intra-household gender-based division of work, which is perhaps the most difficult of all conversations.

## Conclusion

We have shown in this article that Adivasi migrant women's location in the neoliberal city is at the point of convergence of three potent themes: a city unwilling to provide for its migrant populations; a labour market insistent on extracting the maximum profits from its workers; and a division of labour steeped in patriarchal power relations. These forces bring with them disproportionate 'gendered burdens' manifested as relentless work performed by these women.

The concept of gendered burdens can be useful both from the perspective of informing policy, as well as for activism. For policymakers, it highlights the need for policy for women workers to look beyond their participation in the paid labour force of the country, to acknowledge that women's work in the cities where they migrate, both paid and unpaid, are aggravated and intensified by the negligence of both urban governance and labour policies. It highlights the need to evaluate both urban governance and labour policies from this point of view. It stresses the need to use labour- and time-saving strategies when planning cities and designing governance schemes, public facilities, and services, and in regulating employers' responsibility towards workers.

For activists, evidence on gendered burdens can be used to facilitate a process of consciousness building in workers' platforms. An attempt towards this was made in BMVS, forming the beginning of a process where the research findings were used to give power to women's own politics and demand-making. This allowed us to identify and bring into discussion the minute, concealed ways in which women are extracted, which remain unspoken and ignored in the everyday life of the community, governance, and the ways of the labour market. Evidence on gendered burdens thus became the starting point for women in a workers' union to challenge deep-seated gender-based division and devaluation of their work by their co-workers, husbands, and employers. From there, activists could engage with local government bodies to secure labour-saving and health-based facilities. The union was able to move beyond its traditional demands for better wages and jobs, to include, in a more comprehensive manner, all the needs of a migrant household in the city, including basic facilities, services, and public provisioning.

BMVS' methods of using feminist knowledge of gendered burdens to aid its feminist learning, policy demands, and action is an example of how we might call out the patriarchal power relations that are used by the neo-liberal state and capitalist employers to transfer their responsibilities to women. Building up evidence to use to inform policy and activism is a key strategy for individuals and communities contesting economic, political, and social marginalisation on the grounds of gender, ethnicity or caste identity, and migrant identity, such as the Adivasi migrant women in Ahmedabad's construction sector.

## Notes

1. Bhil Adivasis form the largest indigenous, tribal group in India, followed by the Gonds and Santhals. They are predominantly found across the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan, in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, as well as in Tripura. They are divided into different endogamous groups based on territorial divisions and operate with separate sets of clans and lineages. In many of these states, they are officially recognised as Scheduled Tribes under the Indian government's reservation policy of positive discrimination for socioeconomically marginalised groups (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2013).
2. Aajeevika Bureau is a not-for-profit organisation that facilitates and creates spaces for community-based initiatives of informal and migrant workers to advocate with state and employers. It complements these with the direct provisioning of essential services for migrant households, including legal aid and education, skills, health and financial services, and access to social security. More information can be found on the organisation's website: [www.aajeevika.org](http://www.aajeevika.org).
3. BMVS is a registered union of migrant construction workers in Ahmedabad. Formed in 2016, the union has been working on issues of legal education, social security, and skill training of workers.
4. This is the exact median figure from the research.
5. This is an informal practice followed by labour contractors in Ahmedabad's construction industry, where women are hired as an additional worker, along with their husbands, rather than as independent workers. This is not a legally recognised practice, but a prevalent norm which makes it difficult for single women to find work without being accompanied by their male relatives.
6. AMC has a number of urban governance and housing schemes for 'Economically Weaker Sections'. More information on these schemes can be found at [https://ahmedabadcity.gov.in/portal/jsp/Static\\_pages/slum\\_ntwk\\_project.jsp](https://ahmedabadcity.gov.in/portal/jsp/Static_pages/slum_ntwk_project.jsp) (last checked 21 January 2019).
7. The BoCW Act extends across India, but is implemented by individual states' BoCW Welfare Boards. It regulates the employment and conditions of service of building and other construction workers and provides for their safety, health and welfare measures. The full Act can be found at <https://maitri.mahaonline.gov.in/pdf/building-and-other-construction-workers-act-1996.pdf> (last checked 21 January 2019).
8. ASHA workers are trained female health-care activists who are engaged by India's National Rural Health Mission to improve access to primary health-care service at the grassroots, through facilitating access to government health facilities, creating awareness and promoting health behaviour, and mobilising the community for better health outcomes.
9. By 2002, only 8 per cent of the workforce in the country was unionised, and women accounted for a very small proportion of it (varying from 5 to 20 per cent across sectors), in addition to a severe under-representation in leadership (Ratnam and Jain 2002). While all the central trade unions have a women's wing, issues related to women have remained marginal to the overall agenda. Of course there are veritable exceptions to this, such as the Hind Mazdoor Sabha, and the unions of workers from the textile and jute mills of Ahmedabad, which were led by women (*ibid.*). In some industries such as garments and plantations that employ large numbers of women, their representation in unions is also higher, and here women have also played an important part in agitation and advocacy (Sarkar and Bhaumik 1998).
10. The full charter of demands can be accessed at <https://migrantscape.wordpress.com/2019/01/17/1246/> (last checked 21 January 2019).

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